

Pakistan, a troubled soul

By Iqbal Jafar

Tolerance - Part 2

A VAST majority of Pakistanis are well-meaning, tolerant, generous, forgiving and have an amazing capacity to suffer patiently. They are also poor and ill-educated, if not altogether illiterate. This makes them an easy prey to human parasites who feed on them.

These parasites are as numerous as they are greedy, such as: local influentials (sardars, waderas, chaudhries), mafias (land mafia, drug mafia, jobs mafia), criminals (car-lifters, mobile-snatchers, armed burglars, kidnappers), quacks, con men, men from every profession, and a vast array of government functionaries who traditionally have an extortionist approach to dealing with the public at large.

Superimposed on this sordid world of greed, deceit and extortion are the sectarian conflicts, ethnic divides, administrative dysfunction and ceaseless chatter over the air waves of external plots and threats. All this takes a heavy toll on the people's emotional reserve, or whatever is left of it, after their stressful daily struggle for sheer survival. Drained of hope and energy, they yearn for deliverance by whatever means, at whatever cost, by whosoever.

Hope though there is for all we need is focused will and determination to go after the parasites, the hate-mongers, the violators of peace, the arrogant incompetents in positions of authority, and restore the ownership of the country to the people. This hasn't happened for many reasons, but mainly because a powerful segment of the ruling class treats the woes of the people as too mundane or as an inevitable part of human existence, to get too upset about. As the chief representative of that class, Gen Ziaul Haq, once sagely observed: "Providing food to the people is not my responsibility. It is the responsibility of God who has promised livelihood to those whom He has created." This class has other 'higher' purposes in mind for which, according to them, this country was created.

Hence, instead of dealing with the 'mundane', the self-appointed ideologues of that class have remained obsessed with a number of existential questions that are not only false but take us to a parallel universe that exists only in their imagination. Let's hear those questions for our own good. Is Pakistan a country or a concept? Was Pakistan created for the people or for an ideology? Does Pakistan have a global role of grand proselytiser as its ordained destiny? Are we part of South Asia, or Central Asia, or Middle East, or of none of these but of the ummah? Is the belief in the militant ideology a test of patriotism? And, finally, who is a good Muslim?

Pakistan is now more conservative than other Muslim societies such as Turkey or Iran.

These questions have, over the years, determined the course and substance of our national discourse that has remained anchored to 'higher purposes' rather than such 'mundane matters' as access of the people to clean drinking water, to healthcare, to education, to employment, to justice, not to speak of their hopes and aspirations for a happier and more meaningful life. This has brought Pakistan closer to a passionately ritualistic world of religiosity that is as ruthless as it is ignorant.

It is a world that belongs to a medieval past where there is no place for or comprehension of the concerns, hopes and aspirations of the contemporary world, especially of women whose emancipation has just begun.

These are not mere assumptions or impressions. There is statistical evidence to show that Pakistan, once counted among the more liberal of the Muslim countries, is now more conservative than other comparable Muslim societies. More conservative, for example, than Turkey where an Islamist party has been voted to office, or Iran which is being ruled by elected clerics for the last 30 years. Consider some of the surprising results of a six-year long Gallup research study of 35 Muslim societies, as reported by John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed in *Who speaks for Islam*.

... which they favour the same legal rights for women as

gun.

These are not mere assumptions or impressions. There is statistical evidence to show that Pakistan, once counted among the more liberal of the Muslim countries, is now more conservative than other comparable Muslim societies. More conservative, for example, than Turkey where an Islamist party has been voted to office, or Iran which is being ruled by elected clerics for the last 30 years. Consider some of the surprising results of a six-year long Gallup research study of 35 Muslim societies, as reported by John L. Esposito and Dalia Mogahed in *Who speaks for Islam*.

When asked whether they favour the same legal rights for women as for men, 90 per cent of the Turks, 85 per cent of the Iranians and only 67 per cent of the Pakistanis said yes. When asked whether women should have the right to vote, 93 per cent of the Turks, 89 per cent of the Iranians and only 67 per cent of the Pakistanis said yes. When asked whether women should have the right to jobs for which they are qualified, 86 per cent of the Turks, 79 per cent of the Iranians and only 62 per cent of the Pakistanis said yes. No wonder, then, that there are people among us who would like the women to be confined to the houses of their parents or of their husbands.

This is only one of the dimensions of a mindset that is governed by ruthless religiosity rather than compassionate spirituality. Hence the grim irony that for more than two million Pakistanis, fleeing their homes, a living hell has been created mainly by those who are obsessed with the promise of paradise, and who believe that they can get there sooner by slitting throats, lynching women, blowing up schools and other gruesome acts.

They are not madmen on the loose. They are the children of the ideas for which Pakistan has been an incubator for more than six decades. Somehow they have found a niche in our psyche. Why else should a large number of apparently well-meaning, educated and influential people support them or refuse to condemn them?

Let us, therefore, begin by accepting the fact that the battle for the hearts and minds of the people will not cease after the defeat of the Taliban in Malakand and Waziristan. That battle will go on for a long while. And a battle in the realm of ideas is not a bad thing by itself. But the other battle, the one with guns, should now cease to be an option for those sections of our society that may have an agenda to challenge the writ of the state for whatever reasons.

It is, surely, possible to ensure that militancy does cease to be an option, and the rule of law is effectively enforced, within not more than two years. All that we need to do is to make systematic efforts, jointly by major political parties and the civil and military state apparatus to de-weaponise society and revamp the judiciary and the police. All private fire-arms, except licensed shot guns, should be confiscated or bought by the government.

The judiciary and police, especially at the district level, should be re-constituted on the basis of merit and competence and provided better working conditions. These are the necessary conditions to keep the country in one piece. But if, instead, weapons are freely available, and the judiciary and police incompetent and handicapped, there is nothing that can work. The country will steadily slide into anarchy and splinter into bits and pieces. ■

tvo@isb.comsats.net.pk